

mixed drinks you want (bring a Desig. driver if you do — they drive on the left in St. Croix). ([www.stcroixscuba.com](http://www.stcroixscuba.com))

## St. Thomas

**Blue Island Divers, Frenchmans Reef, February 2004, John Jackson (jacksnr@yahoo.com) Laguna Niguel, CA.** Experience: 26-50 dives. Vis: 50 to 70 Feet. Water: 75 to 78 F, choppy. Small boat with capacity for only six divers. Stern ramp for entry and good ladder for reboarding. Boat captain efficient in setting up for both dives. Dive trip limited to shallow, protected location by daughter taking “resort” course and making her first 2 dives. The divemaster was thorough in his instruction, and encouraging in his demeanor. My daughter thoroughly enjoyed the experienced. The divemaster was very good about taking her where she could see lots of fish, including groupers, a large barracuda, and several turtles. Separate buckets for masks and cameras. ([www.blueislanddivers.com](http://www.blueislanddivers.com))

**Blue Island Divers, Marriott, June 2004, Sheryl O'Connor (johnconnor2@cox.net) South Windsor, CT.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 25 to 50 Feet. Water: 76 to 81 F, choppy. Smaller operation with personalized service. There were never more than 10 divers on a boat and for most of the trips, there were only 5 or 6. We saw many other dive operations' boats with what looked like 20 or more divers on them. Blue Island picked us up at the dock at the Marriott at Frenchman's Bay and were extremely accommodating, as well as respectful

and mindful of the various levels of experience in the boat. The wreck sites were the most interesting and there are plenty of them. Easy trip and no-hassle “American” experience.

**Blue Water Divers, Wyndham Sugar Bay, May 2004, David Reubush (davereubush@cox.net), Toano, VA.** Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 50 to 60 Feet. Water: 82 to 83 Fahrenheit, calm. Blue Water Divers are easy to work with and friendly. They have a new boat that has a head, an important criteria for an over 55 diver. The dive-master this year was not the same as those last year. While he was a friendly kid he was just doing a job and putting in time. Most dives were out and back from the boat with virtually no effort expended to point out items of interest. The typical clientele were cruise ship divers with little or no experience so they did not know what good diving is. I was always the last into the boat and I still always came up with over 1100 psi. The Wyndham is sorely in need of renovation. The beds were uncomfortable, the carpets threadbare, the pool and hot tub missing tiles. The food was of the quantity over quality variety. ([www.bwdivers.com](http://www.bwdivers.com))

**Chris Sawyer Diving Center, Marriott Morning Star Beach, February 2004, Eric Frick (pande296@sbcglobal.net) Elmhurst, IL.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 35 to 50 Feet. Water: 77 to 79 F, surge. The reservation process via e-mail through their website was easy. I was contacted via phone message a few days before the trip to advise that the 1st 2-tank would depart

at 9:30 instead of 8:30. The Sea Biscuit is 42' long and a nice boat from which to dive. Capacity is 18 divers with bench seating running the length of the deck on both sides of the boat leaving the center of the deck open. My first 2-tank trip was lead by Chris himself. We had 10 divers plus a crew of 3. The onboard ice chest was full with jugs of water. Towels were provided. Fruit slices were passed around between dives. The briefings were complete and professionally done. O2 and first aid kits are aboard. Visibility was fine but not up to the 80 to 120 feet featured in their brochure. Divers were divided into 2 groups and each group was lead by a DM. My second 2-tank trip was lead by members of Chris' staff. We had 4 divers plus a crew of 2. No ice, water, towels or fruit this time but a fine trip anyway. St. Thomas and the surrounding waters might not merit a trip for just diving but there is plenty to do once you are done diving. It was worth the trouble of bringing along my scuba equipment. One thing that should not be missed is a chartered day sailing trip with Chris' wife Maxine aboard her 41' sailboat the “Lou” ([www.sail-withcaptainmax.com](http://www.sail-withcaptainmax.com)). The Marriott is a very nice hotel but, not cheap. Consider staying at the Morning Star Beach area vs. the Frenchman's Reef part of the hotel. Morning Star is down on the beach and features nicer rooms. The ride from the hotel to Chris' dive dock is at least 20 minutes. ([www.sawyerdiver.vi](http://www.sawyerdiver.vi))

**Coki Beach Dive Club, Cruise, January 2004, Bruce Thompson**

([thompsv@Sherbtel.net](mailto:thompsv@Sherbtel.net)) **Cambridge, MN.** Experience: 25 dives. Vis: 40 to 50 Feet. Water: 80 F, calm. My daughters did the Discover Program and I joined them on the open water dive. Saw a hawksbill turtle, coral sponges and reef fish. Not very challenging but good to get reacquainted with the water. Being from Minnesota our lakes are frozen in January. ([www.cokidive.com](http://www.cokidive.com))

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## The Wider Caribbean Live-Aboards

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### THE BAHAMAS

**AquaCat, November 2003, Dean K. Knudson (deanknudson@yahoo.com) Golden Valley, MN.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 75 to 84 F, choppy. Relatively new boat, built in 2001. There are 100 cu.ft. tanks however two of our group didn't pay attention while using the higher capacity tanks and were given deco warnings by their computers. The Exumas and the Eluthera features excellent unspoiled diving, with walls available on all days. Coral seems to be in excellent health. Bunking three to a cabin lowers the combined price to around \$1200. Divemasters, chef, captain and boat support staff are all excellent. Difficult night diving. “sea worms” that can be so thick as to obstruct diving vision almost completely. We found ourselves diving at night in teams of three divers, each alternately turning on and off his light to confuse these worms which migrate

toward any light. There are also “sea wasps” that sting slightly, and which hang in the ten foot range. Lights are turned off during ascent, and the boat is kept completely dark until the last night diver is on deck, to keep attraction of sea wasps to a minimum. “Washing machine” is a drift dive that follows a massive current between two cays, timed with the tides for maximum current. A high speed somersaulting blast! The boat motion can be brisk. The periphery of the main salon can travel up and down some two to four feet during crossings and slow turns adjacent to dive sites, and more than once meals were interrupted when plates and drinks flew unto the floor. Cruising speed is about 13 to 15 miles per hour. Most crossings are less than four hours. About 10% of the passengers were seasick at some point in the trip. Many prop planes make the hop from Miami and Ft. Lauderdale every two hours for about \$200 round trip. The shark dive was excellent, more than 25 sharks that fed for about 25 minutes, then stayed in the area. I have been on four shark dives, and I can't help but think that someone someday will be seriously hurt, but this crew is as safe as any. Three of the crew have had DCS and have spent time in the chamber as a result of dives earlier in their lives. The captain apparently has given up scuba due to repeated DCS bouts. There is a massive quantity of liquor on board, Bahamian beer, Russian vodka, whiskey and rum. There is also a blender, wet bar and nice stereo on the top deck under the stars. The chef sells Cuban cigars at a fair price. The boat caters to an interna-

tional crowd, and they could benefit from getting a cheap electronic word translator to facilitate dive briefings and casual conversations. Cabins are spotless and modern, with a toilet and shower built into each cabin. Plenty of hot, fresh water with two shower stalls right on the dive deck next to a toilet. Night diving takes on a new meaning when you can take off a cold wetsuit while standing under a hot shower! no crowds and no other divers, and it's no less spectacular on the large walls than in Cozumel. There is little current. The dive sites near Nassau are nothing special. The blue hole near Nassau is a curiosity that holds one's interest for about ten minutes. There is zero onshore entertainment in the Exumas and in Eleuthera. There are two shore excursions, one to a cay inhabited by Iguanas, and one to the park on Exuma. There is little fishing available off of the back of the ship as it cruises too fast. There are kayaks if one has the energy after diving all day. I didn't. ([www.aquacatcruises.com](http://www.aquacatcruises.com))

**AquaCat, January 2004, Douglas Hansen (mhel0323@sbcglobal.net) San Jose, CA.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 80 Feet. Water: 74 to 77 F, choppy, currents, no currents. Crew went out of their way to accommodate their passengers. The boat is in excellent shape with very large cabins. There is lots of storage space in the cabins, and the crew will store your empty suitcases elsewhere on the boat so you don't waste cabin space. The food was very good and perhaps a little plentiful! It was easy to put on a few extra pounds. Up to five dives a day are

possible, including a night dive on most days. Most of the rooms had large picture windows, all the rooms had individual air conditioning controls, private heads and showers, and even a small refrigerator. Hot showers were available on the dive deck. Nitrox was available for an extra charge, and you had your choice of tank capacities. Often there were snacks available after dives. Sea kayaking, fishing, lobstering, and shore excursions were available for no extra charge. The crew was very safety conscious, often checking the current before allowing divers to enter the water. A check-in/check-out board was used to keep track of divers on board or in the water. Drift dives were done en masse. A chase boat was available in case some divers surfaced far from the boat. There was always at least one divemaster or instructor in the water during the dives. However, once they were satisfied with your skills, you could go off and dive your own profile. The diving was nice, but generally not that exciting. There were several nice sites, especially Dog Rocks wall, and at several sites we saw numerous sharks and large grouper. However, most of the dives were in fairly shallow areas with sand and rubble bottom. The corals were not in very good shape in some areas, and the fish life could be a little sparse. Some of the drift dives were in very minor current, and the divers were herded together by the divemasters so that we could all be picked up at once. The one shark feeding dive was interesting for about 10 minutes, then I wandered off to try and find other creatures. The diving ranged from fair to good. This is an excellent

boat and itinerary for new and intermediate divers. Divers with more experience may want to look for something a little more challenging. Dedicated camera rinse tanks and one large table. Outlets nearby for recharging. The camera table was a little small for the number of photographers on this trip.

**AquaCat, February 2004, Robin J. Humphrey (robmarta@tampabay.rr.com) Crystal River, FL.**

Experience: Over 1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water a little cold for wimps like us, (75-77 F.) but not unexpected this time of year. One of the best, and most helpful, and skilled non-intrusive crews we have experienced in many years of diving. Jim, the cook, worked wonders in the galley, providing menus for all tastes and quirks. There could have been a bit more cleanliness in the salon, and rooms should be vacuumed at least twice on the 6 day voyage. The Captain ran a happy and safe boat. Diving was as good as it gets in the Bahamas, I'd go again but a little later in the year. Ambient temp was very comfortable, but a bit cool for diving these old bones. Most of the crew were photo instructors. All took photo gear diving on one dive or another. E-6 processing available. Very comprehensive digital setup for those using digital format. Plenty of room and wash facilities for camera gear.

**AquaCat, May 2004, Phil & Grace Hampton, (gracphil@palmnet.net), Orlando, FL.** Dives logged: Phil - 2,190, Grace - 800. High seas and wind first three days, but crew found

calm area with great diving. Great boat, great crew. Largest rooms and shower of the dozen live-aboards we have been on. Boat was clean and in good condition. The food was good and plentiful. We had a near drowning incident with one of our group, who ran out of air due to the divers negligence. The quick, organized rescue by the crew, including extensive mouth-to-mouth, saved her life. We were also fortunate to have an emergency room nurse and two emergency doctors on board as guests. Throughout the emergency the diver never thought of dropping her weights. The shark feeding (using the Walkers Cay chumsicle method) was awe inspiring, and safe.

**AquaCat, October 2004, James Heimer (jmsjnk@earthlink.net), Houston, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 10 to 50+ Feet. Water: 79 to 82 Fahrenheit, choppy, surge. A new (2002) catamaran dive boat with a well thought-out layout. The cabins are spacious, comfortable, and clean with plenty of storage space and an ensuite bathroom with shower (we never ran out of hot water!). The salon easily handled the 20 divers for meals with an area for briefings and “lounging.” Plenty of topside areas for sunning or enjoying the scenery (or dining al fresco). The dive deck was well designed with plenty of room to suit up and easy access to the water directly from the deck or the dive platform. No rinse tanks for gear, but there were shower stalls on the dive deck that could be used while removing gear. The diving suffered from the recent hurricanes (northern Exuma Cays and area around

Nassau). There was a lot of silt that was easily stirred up by a fin kick, and there was an absence of conch and other bottom dwellers, since the sand areas were buried by 6 to 8 inches of fine muck; there was a lot of sand on the hard and soft corals. Sharks and eagle and sting rays, morays, and turtles were seen by on all dives, and there was a variety of deep diving on walls and shallower dives, mostly around Highbourne Cay. The captain did his best to find sites with good visibility, low current, and relatively calm conditions, moving the boat a lot and 4 to 6 foot swells with light chop were common. We did two “high speed” drift dives which were a lot of fun. The dive staff was competent, but kept to themselves (with some exceptions). The dive platform was not manned at all times that divers were in the water. The staff usually went up to the dive deck after most divers came out of the water, and several times my wife and I had to call up to get someone to assist us. However, during the roughest exit, swimmers were in the water to assist with cameras, fins, and other gear. Dive briefings were cursory. The dive staff usually did not know where the boat was with respect to the mooring, and no one was put in the water to check current and visibility before the dive. Camera table in the center of the dive deck provided adequate and safe storage between dives and room to set up cameras. Two large rinse tanks for camera gear on the dive deck; also low pressure air to blow equipment off. Photo processing on board. Limited facilities to display digital photos (computer with 17” lcd screen, and had to compete with crew

(doing daily accounts) to download cameras to CD’s. Computer had Photoshop for editing.

**Blackbeard’s Cruises, December 2003, Frank (scubafolks@juno.com), Colorado Springs, CO.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 15 to 50 Feet. Water: 72 to 78 F, calm. Poor service overall. Weather precluded about 2 the dives, and the captain did nothing to appease. Company provided no response to their questionnaire. Only reasonable respite from bad weather is to go to your bunk — which is not any bigger than a sleeping bag. Rooms were either too cold, or lacked AC and became too warm and stuffy. Overall bad experience: Dunk tank for cameras. Had to use kitchen table for working with camera. ([www.blackbeard-cruises.com](http://www.blackbeard-cruises.com))

**Blackbeard’s Cruises, June 2004, Eric Frick (pande296@sbcglobal.net) Elmhurst, IL.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 30 to 75 Feet. Water: 83 to 87 F, calm, surge. “Camping at sea” is an apt description. Jolly shipmates, good weather and a good crew will all add up to a good or even great experience. The 65’ boats accommodate up to 23 divers plus 6 crew but conditions are crowded & privacy is nonexistent. Our trip departed Miami @ 3:00 p.m. on Sat. and we disembarked the following Fri. @ 9:00 a.m. On our crossing to Bimini, we encountered a school of dolphin which made for a good photo op. After clearing customs in Bimini, we headed south for their first trip to Cay Sal of the year. It was a long trip under motor and sail but div-

ing the Big Blue Hole and the Red Hole down there was worth it. Calm winds at this time of the year meant that we raised the sail to add another knot or so to our speed but there was not enough wind to simply sail with no motor. Food was plentiful but uninspired. Diving (18 dives, including 2 night dives) was good but not outstanding. The crew was very nice and did all they could to make the trip a success. Capt. Earnie did an outstanding job. Engineer Clay kept systems running on the Morning Star. Every boat has its quirks and persistent problems and these well-used boats are no exception. Bring small clamps purchased at your local home center instead of clothes pins for hanging items out to dry. Consider foam earplugs for a more peaceful night’s sleep, especially if you are berthed in the salon area where everyone eats. Stack the odds in your favor: Go when warmer water reduces your need for thermal protection. Go when warmer weather and calmer seas mean a smoother crossing from Miami and reduced need for clothing. Bring along plenty of buddies for a friendly atmosphere and a solid voting block to influence any decisions offered up for a vote by the captain. Dedicated camera rinse tank. No dedicated work area for cameras.

**Blackbeard’s (Sea Explorer), July 2004, David Schwab (schwabd@bunt.com),** Experience: 251-500 dives, Vis: 10 to 30 Meters. Water: 27-29 C. calm. Captain and crew were first class, made the passengers comfortable. Already cramped quarters would have been worse if the boat had a full com-

pliment of passengers. If you are ultra-modest, go elsewhere. With a couple of exceptions, the sites were okay, but not terribly exciting and certainly not challenging. Good experience for novice divers. Best sites: MS Hesperus at night (lots of loggerhead turtles); Bull Run (shark feed); South Peak (what a wall!). The shark feed was well managed; diver safety came first, also responsible treatment of sharks (sharks seen only at Bull Run). Food was plentiful, lots of seconds; drinks and snacks available 24 hours. Clear skies, occasionally a squall. Pack a rain suit; there isn't much cover on deck. My shorty was comfortable. There could be jellyfish (I have a mark from a sea wasp, 30 days later). Visits to Bimini are a nice break, just don't expect much (stay away from the guy with the coconuts); a visit to Andros is a waste of time. A worthwhile trip; good value for your money; don't expect to be pampered. No specific facilities for UWP, but a separate fresh water tub for cameras. TV to show photos.

**Coral Reef II, April 2004, Lloyd Schwengel (swendiver@aol.com) Brea, CA.** Vis: 40-100 ft. Water: 75-76 F. Dives logged: 622. This was not your usual live-aboard trip. You're not pampered here. The New England Aquarium conducts a fish collection trip. It is a working trip to collect certain species and sizes of fish for the Aquarium. The cost is a little more than an equivalent trip but there are tax consequences. You are asked to help collect fish and with some additional chores while on board. The final day is called packing day and you really get

to work here helping to pack the fish for shipment to Boston. Each diver is given two nets, a collection bag and a probe stick to use, along with a little instruction on how to catch the fish. This was my third trip with them so I had some experience. The five rooms on the *Coral Reef II* are small but adequate and are A/C'd. Only one has a private bath others share two with marine heads. All the rooms are below the main deck with no widows or portholes. Meals are served in the main lounge with two large tables. Breakfast is self serve with the normal items including cereal, yogurt, toast, fresh fruit, with pancakes and eggs with sausage or bacon on some days. Lunch is buffet style with good variety and plenty for everyone. Dinner is served family style. Nobody went hungry after any meal. The dinners were excellent and desserts after each one. Drinks and snacks are provided throughout the trip. The diving area shares area with the fish storage tanks and aquariums so gets a little crowded. You keep your equipment under two hanging tables and pickup aluminum 80's from two boxes, one on each side of the vessel and set up your equipment near your table. You can use a bench seat near the exit ladder if you need to. The swim step is adequate with two deep ladders, one normal the other a tree style. Weights are provided but not belts. There is no equipment rented or repaired, do your own. This trip started for the divers in Nassau where the boat was docked at the cruise ship pier. We headed south towards the Exumas. We did a checkout dive in the northern Exumas since four of us were not from

the Boston area and could not do it before. The dive sites are picked with the 'fish wish list' in mind as well as the weather and diving conditions. Most of ours were at Conception Island, Rum Cay, and the Exumas. Since this trip ended in Miami we made a few dives at the Berry Islands and Bimini area on the way back. Most dives were shallow, less than 40 feet with some at Conception deeper, looking for a specific deep reef species, black cap basselets. The water was pretty consistently 75 or 76 degrees F with considerable surface chop due to wind. On my other trips to the Bimini area, the water was 80 degrees with flat surfaces. A few night dives were included in a total of 3 or 4 dives a day. The Aquarium provides a must bring list, a nice to have list, and a fish wish list. There are also the usual waivers and forms to fill out. The boat is owned by the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago so you have to fill out their waivers and forms also. There is a lot of comradship that grows between the divers as well as the staff. The *Coral Reef* has a crew of three, two captains and a cook. The Aquarium has at least three staff there also. It was fun to watch the newbys try to catch fish as a team but moving far to fast, get discouraged and go off on their own insuring that they would catch nothing. They then watch the staff and experienced people and eventually try working as a team again only much slower with increasing success. So why pay more for a trip that expects you to work? Remember those tax consequences? Besides it's fun, you learn a lot about fish identification, habits, as

well as contribute to a worthy cause. As a bonus, if you get to Boston, you can dive in their Giant Ocean Tank. It's a great feeling to see the faces of kids watching you and the animals in the tank. Be sure to wave to them.  
([www.neadc.org](http://www.neadc.org))

**Easy Going, Paradise Charters, April 2004, Eric Dahlgren, Fort Collins, CO.** 500 dives. I've been an *Undercurrent* subscriber for years and really appreciate the wonderful job you guys do. After reading two favorable reviews of Paradise Charter's *Easy Goin'* live-aboard in *Undercurrent*, I reserved my space for a six-night, seven-day trip to the Bimini/Cat Cay area of the Bahamas. I boarded the 62' steel converted crew boat on a beautiful, sunny Fort Lauderdale Sunday afternoon and was impressed with how clean and orderly the boat appeared. The three guest rooms and all the common areas were spotless, wood and brass was gleaming, and personal decorating touches of the owners, Chuck Petrozella (Captain) and Peg Schwalen (First Mate and Chief Cook) were evident. With only six divers on board, I quickly felt like part of the family and the personal service was genuine. Departed Bahia Mar Marina and slept through the seven-hour crossing to Bimini. A good part of the morning on Monday was spent clearing customs in Bimini (\$65/person) but we did three dives before evening. When I crawled out of my bunk early Tuesday morning, Captain Chuck was watching a major storm moving out of the Midwest and circling Florida, heading

in our direction. The prediction was that it would hit us that evening bringing eight foot seas and 15-20 knot winds and would last at least two days, maybe three. Captain Chuck offered us two options. (1) We could dive all day and then motor back to Bimini Harbor (the only suitable protection in the area) and ride out the storm, hoping that it would subside earlier than predicted. Or (2) we could do two dives on the present site, motor to Bimini and clear customs, and then head back to Fort Lauderdale that afternoon. If we decided on option 2, Paradise Charters offered us a credit of \$1000 toward any future trip and said that we could sleep on the boat Tuesday night when we got back to Fort Lauderdale. Considering the odds that our diving for the rest of the trip was over as soon as the storm hit that evening, and with the second option we would spend three nights on the boat, eat eight delicious meals, have five excellent dives, and drive all over the ocean in a great boat, we thought Option 2 was more than generous. Two Blackbeard's boats and the *Sea Fever* were in the area. They all spent the rest of the week in Bimini Harbor possibly competing for the one divable site, the wreck of the *Sapona*. ([www.paradisecharters.com](http://www.paradisecharters.com))

**Juliet, May 2004, Chuck Aldridge, Burnville, NC.** Vis: 80-100 feet. Water: 80-82 F. Dives logged: 250. Sailboat provided great diving with relaxation. Great crew. ([www.sailjuliet.com](http://www.sailjuliet.com))

**Juliet, June 2004, Frank Hall & Carole Ott (cott79@msn.com),**

**Floyds Knobs, IN.** Vis: 60-100 feet. Water: 82-83 F. Dives logged: 400. The boat and accommodations aren't fancy, but are clean and well maintained. There are three heads and two showers. One cabin is a quad, the rest are doubles. If everyone is in the salon/dining room at the same time, it's a bit crowded. However, we had good weather and a few of us often ate on the deck. The food was down home cooking, nothing gourmet. Captain John Beltramo and the crew were outstanding. The Juliet has a laid back itinerary. We dove three times during the day and once each night. We also sailed twice and spear fished. Although we encountered an unusual amount of current, the dive sites were still great. We saw sharks, groupers, and generally a lot of life. We also saw several turtles, including a huge Loggerhead (can you say Volkswagen size!).

**Juliet, July 2004, Michael Holland (mholland@cypressmail.com) Houston, TX.** Experience: 101-250 dives. Vis: 40 to 75 Feet. Water: 80 to 90 F, calm. The staff were eager to please. a 104' schooner and when there is wind, they turn off the engine and they sail. Lots of fun. The diving was OK as the conditions didn't help visibility. Excellent for divers with a little less experience. We had 4 new divers certifying on board and that may have influenced some of the earlier shallow dive sites. We got in 17 dives in 5 days of diving. Three of the 5 days we only made 3 dives which was a little disappointing. They switch to the BVI's in the winter months. . My wife and I had a nice vacation. Rinse buckets avail-

able. Staff helpful in handing cameras down to divers and taking them when you came up.

**Nekton Pilot, July 2004, James Heimer, (jmsjnk@earthlink.net), Houston, TX.** Experience: 251-500 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 85 to 88 F, calm, choppy, surge, currents. Left Fort Lauderdale and transited overnight to Grand Bahama, Bimini, Cat Cay area. Weather was rough for first two days with six to eight foot swells. We used Bonine, though boat design (semi sub type hull) mitigates excessive motion. One problem is that the diving deck remains relatively stationary, which causes high swells to "break" under the deck. Coming back aboard in these conditions is like swimming into the surf. The dive deck is raised a few feet when the ship is transiting and lowered to a few feet above sea level for diving. Gear is left on the tanks, but there is not cover from the sun and rinsing facilities are rudimentary. Excellent dive sites (shark alley — there were sharks), Hesperus (large hawksbill turtles, barracuda), Theos Wreck (deep dive under beautiful conditions). Sites were both deep and shallow (mostly deeper) and current was strong on some sites. The seas mitigated after two days and we had calm thereafter. Good briefings on what to look and suggested route and profile, They left it up to the divers to explore on their own, but would guide a dive on request. Large salon for meals and each evening a seminar was given on reef ecology, fish ID, etc. The meals are served buffet style, and the food was plentiful and prepared excellently with

a good variety. The crew was helpful, especially C. Lee (photography expert), Wes (who repaired the underwater cable on my video light) and Chris (who guided a dive for my wife and me, when we had concern about the current). Camera tables above diving deck. Camera staging tank on diving deck and rinse tanks near camera tables. Color slide processing available. Hip had computer facilities to review and download digital photos to CD's, including display on 42" LCD flat panel screen. Members of staff knowledgeable about photography and very accommodating to assisting divers at all levels of photographic experience. ([www.nektoncruises.com](http://www.nektoncruises.com))

**Nekton Rorqual, November 2003, Donald "Digger" Rowe (donaldrowe@earthlink.net) Glendora, CA.** Experience: Over 1000 dives. Good trip. Big rectangular boat with lots of room in salon and on sun deck. Had room to myself with two twin beds side by side. Dive deck could be a problem. Tanks were very close together as were the benches knee to knee. We had only 21 divers versus a full load of 32, and I had a group of six who dove with me and were the first in the water so we had no difficulty. The rest of the divers were with a dive shop and were willing to wait for a while before going in. Food was exceptional, as was the all American crew who had the most "can do" attitude I have seen in seven former live-aboards. Diving was typical Caribbean. We went to Conception Island, San Salvador, and Rum Cay. Saw some Caribbean reef sharks, a few rays, few turtles (the natives are over

fishing them), typical groupers, and large barracudas hanging in the shadow of the boat. Water was 82.5 F from the surface to the bottom in most places. Viz was generally in the 100+ ft range. Surface temp was 80 to 85, but we always had +/- 20 knot wind over the deck, so had to get out of wet suit between dives to prevent wind chill. Currents were mild in most cases, and where there was current, boat ran a granny line from the ladder to the anchor line. All anchor points were pre-set tie downs to minimize reef damage and directly on the dive site so navigation to and from the boat was simplified. Boat was so huge, that when you really couldn't see it, you could still make out this dark mass on the surface in the distance. 27 dives were available if you made the four night dives. Nitrox was available, but only myself and one other diver used it. Many dives were to 90ft+ levels, and some did not have a shallower bottom to cruise at the latter part of the dive. Some of the ascents were on the anchor line for better control. Boat has safety stop bar at 15 feet. Crew didn't dive unless asked by guests to be a dive buddy. All of the dive buddies were Divemaster level or above in rating. They liked to be asked. Many really didn't know the dive sites well enough to take you to the spots where the critters hide. Boat serves no liquor or carbonated beverages but allows guests to bring their own. The drink-during was hard liquor rather than beer and wine I have typically seen before, because of the logistics of bringing the lighter alcoholic beverages aboard. ([www.nektoncruises.com](http://www.nektoncruises.com))

***Nekton Rorqual, April 2004, Jack Hall, Ripon, CA.*** Landed in Great Exuma. Had to hire a taxi to the Two Turtles Inn (20 minutes and \$20). There was a party at the hotel, so we did not get to sleep until midnight. The next morning we were picked up and taken to the boat 200 feet away. The crew were cheerily helpful. The room was surprisingly roomy and had a shower, sink, small closet with shelves and a 14 in space under the bed where we stored our suitcases. The bed was slightly lumpy, but clean and comfortable. On the bulletin board, they had pictures of the crew with their names, good for helping us get to know the crew. On the first day, they took photos of the divers and posted them with their names. The main salon is roomy with windows all around. They have library of fiction books, videos, and fish ID books and diving books and videos. Dive briefings were given before the first dive at each stop, with a drawing of the topography of the reef, the position of the boat, compass headings, and swim throughs, critters, anchors, etc. No diving below 130 feet, return to the boat when one buddy is low on air, no solo diving, 3 minute safety stop on the hang bar which is 8 feet long and it has a safety tank hanging off it. All divers were assigned a steel 90 at a specific location and a cubby below the bench in which they could put their gear. The platform is down when divers are entering the water, and the drop is 3-1/2 feet. The dive deck which runs across the entire stern of the boat is raised and lowered by a steel cable which has grease on it. Divers to can enter the water from the

stern with a 10 inch drop, or they could climb down the ladder. Returning to the boat involves entry from the stern-first hand the camera up to the waiting crew member, then remove fins and hand them up and then climb up the ladder. There are two 55 gallon plastic drums with fresh water for the cameras. They had E-6 processing and I had one roll developed, but they were not mounted, had chemical streaks on the film, and there was a scratch through a couple frames. Breakfast 7-8, briefing at 8 AM, dive deck open at 8:15 or so, dive two dives, with a morning snack offered between dives, lunch beginning around 12:30 with the boat moving to a different site during lunch, Briefing before the afternoon dives, 2 afternoon dives with hot cookies served between the two dives, dive deck closed around 5:30 for dinner, slide show at around 6:30, dive deck open for night diving around 7:30 or 8:00 and after dive drinks (alcohol not provided, BYOB) with popcorn. First drink of the day marks the end of diving for the day. Food served buffet style — balanced, healthy, generally not heavy on fat, lots of variety, plenty of salads and vegetables. Fresh cornbread, good desserts and snacks and fruit available any time of day or night. Equal to or better than good quality coffee shop food. I carry only fins mask snorkel, wet suit and camera gear, and rent a BCD and regulator at the dive site. The only type of BCD's and regulators where the secondary hose came out of the lower right side of the BCD. Every time I attempted to turn my head to the left to look at my camera settings, the hose would pull

me back to the right, like a bit on a horse. Captain Nelson loaned me his personal BCD and regulator for the whole trip. At our first stop, the diving was great and the divemasters were helpful. We saw some reef sharks from a distance. White powder was on o much of the coral ( I think it may have been the aspergillus fungus I have read about. Most sites were wall dives. Once the current began to pick up, and by the end of the second dive it was easily 2 knots — for our safety stop, we were like flags flying in the wind. We had to skip the night dive, because the current picked up to something like 6 knots or so. In a few other places, we had a half-knot current or so. The worst visibility was 60 feet or so, and the best approached 200, the average in excess of 100 feet. Saw barracuda, sharks, sting rays, pipe fish, hog fish, octopus, lots of horse eye jacks in large schools, blue chromis, butterfly fish of all sorts, graysby, garden eels, sand divers, gobies, A reef shark spotted us from about 150-200 feet away and came directly across the sand towards us in a leisurely manner. He got to within about four or five feet of Sandy (who had his video camera going), then swam back in the direction he came from.

***Nekton Rorqual, May 2004, George Landgrabe, Maitland, FL.*** Vis: 50-100 feet. Water: 79-80 F. Dives logged: 500+. 31 divers yet was plenty of room for everyone. The rooms were well equipped, though small, there was everything you needed. Meals were plentiful and special diets were catered to. They made sure you logged in and

out of the water and had a buddy, but other than that, they announced when the dive deck was open and when it would close and you got in as many dives as you could in that period of time. Tanks were filled as soon as you got back for the next dive. We had 30-mile winds most of the week and the boat rode great, none of this loping through the waves but smooth progress. Dive locations were well chosen all the way down to Cay Lobos and back.

**Nekton Rorqual, June 2004, J. Pereira, Lawton, OK.** Cay Lobos itinerary. This is our 4th trip with Nekton (two on *Pilot* and two on *Rorqual*). The office staff were very helpful. But on the boat you can't even buy a hat or shirt! The *Rorqual* is starting to show some wear. The rooms were recently repainted. The towels and linen need to be replaced badly. The bed is a mattress on an aluminum slab, and not very comfortable, but passable. The medicine cabinets are rusted inside and not useable. The outside of the boat is being painted in phases. The Astroturf covering the outside deck areas is in good shape. The inside rugs are fairly new, but are a mess, having been laid in pieces. Toilet/shower room floor is delimitating some. The hot water was plentiful and the AC worked great. The dive deck was fairly crowded with 31 divers aboard. After a day or so the divers put themselves in two informal shifts to facilitate getting in the water. When divers were getting in, one crew member was busy with Nitrox analysis and paperwork. When divers were getting

out of the water one crew member was busy filling tanks. While a crew member took your fins or camera, no one gets a hand up out of the water. In some cases no one is watching the diver getting up out of the water. In any kind of chop, there needs to be three on the dive deck with one crew member dedicated to getting the divers safely out of the water. There are two hot showers right off the dive deck, and hot towels one flight up. Plenty of juice, food was plentiful and very good served buffet style. Lots of variety. Brett was the cook. He catered to those on the Atkins diet. He turned out cakes for those celebrating special events like birthdays and anniversaries. While it is not gourmet dining, it is very, very good. Fresh vegetables all week. Hot cookies at 10am and a snack about 2 pm. We were allowed to stop at a liquor store on the way to the boat and purchase our private stocks. Crew, all friendly and helpful. A previous *Undercurrent* review was critical of the captain. He is proficient as a boat captain. Although he asked for guest comments, comments on the very strong (and possibly unsafe) current off Cat Key (second dive had only 6 go in the water with a couple of those aborting) resulted in him becoming defensive and upset (although he later turned the nearby second dive site into a drift dive). A passing comment on the diminishing visibility off Bimini resulted in the guests being chastised. Other than one young diver, all divers appeared to be experienced. Nitrox and Nitrox training/certification is offered. Diving ranged from good to great. The boat has a late Saturday departure.

First day (Sun) is done off Cat Key with strong currents. Second day was in the vicinity of Morrero Reef (E of Cay Sal Bank). Excellent diving there. 3rd day is at Los Bandaras reef area and is mostly walls with great black coral. (Night dive done here.) 4th day starts on same reef and at various locations. Afternoon is a dive at Cay Lobos (at Cabbage Gardens at the lighthouse); great site, but only time for one long or two short dives. 5th day is devoted to diving blue holes near Dumas Rocks. (Note that at the Big Blue Hole site, the *Nekton Pilot* is still feeding sharks and doing a chumsicle dive! I thought Nekton had given up this practice) Last diving day is done off Bimini with the last dive site being The Strip (where a night dive was done); great dive site. The further south we went, the less of a current was experienced. The visibility was frequently quoted by the crew to be 80', but it was cut significantly in most sites by the murky and ranged between 30'-80' (and better at deep sites). Water temp was 82-84 degrees. All in all, the trip was good. After being on Bahama Adventure, Southern Bahamas, Cay Sal, and Cay Lobos intimacies, our favorite has been the Southern Bahamas trip (out of Greater Exhuma).

**Sea Fever, June 2004, Debbie Finch, Saint Cloud, FL.** Experience: 501-1000 dives. Vis: 50 to 110 Feet. Water: 82 to 84 F, calm. Excellent dive operation — safety oriented, but didn't "hold our hands." We were treated as responsible divers. They did not restrict the length of our dives, or the depth, other than a request to stay above 130 feet

and return to the boat with 500 psi. The crew topped off tanks. steel 80s and 95s, which allows for light weight belts. The captain was responsive to special requests, such as a 5:30 am dive, and a crew member was always available if a single diver wanted to do a night dive. Captain Red understands good customer service! The food was excellent, and there was plenty of it. Not gourmet, just good eating, especially the ribs, burgers, chops, and freshly baked bread. The cook even baked a cake for us to hold a birthday celebration. Breakfasts were not cooked to order, but the variety was good. Snacks were generally of the trail mix and bagged candy variety. Wine is available at dinner and is included in the charter price. Each diver on the boat is given a mug with his or her name, and there are pegs for storage. They were responsive to special dietary requests. The cabins are small, but adequately ventilated. The top deck has lots of furniture for lounging and catching rays, but is not covered. One member of our group rigged a sunshade with a tarp and bungee cords. The diving was very good; because of the remote location of the Cay Sal Banks. The reefs looked healthy. We did a mixture of anchor and drift dives during the week. We went ashore at Elbow Cay to explore the abandoned lighthouse and derelict structures. Victory Reef, south of Bimini, is several miles long, covered with lush coral growth, and contains numerous crevices that hide turtles, sharks, lobsters, etc. We saw lots of Sargassum triggerfish here. Saw several sharks, numerous large midnight and rainbow parrotfish, and some big

lobsters and crabs, along with the usual tropical reef critters. Very good trip! Rinse tank, and spacious camera table provided. Small air tank available for drying lenses and blowing away those pesky drops of water.  
([www.seafever.com](http://www.seafever.com))

**Sea Fever, June 2004, James & Linda Dyer, (jhdyer@mindspring.com), Cleveland, TN.** Experience: 251-500 dives Vis: 35 to 60 Feet. Water: 85 to 86 Fahrenheit, choppy, no currents. Large, well equipped boat with adequate accommodations. Cabins are a bit cramped and marine heads are shared. Some rooms have in room sinks but most don't. The dive deck while large can get busy when everyone is getting ready. We took 18 people but still had enough room to spread out and find our own space. The sun deck got a good workout. The crew was friendly and helpful. Meals were good and plentiful. Dry table and separate rinse tub provided for equipment. Dry table becomes a gathering place for anything and everything during the trip. Underwater video playback using video system in main salon. Storage shelf in main salon with adequate space for battery recharging.

**Sea Fever, August 2004, Tom Vetter, Phoenix, AZ.** Prior to our trip my wife and I purchased new regulators and BC's. When we got home I had rust in my new first stage. A drift dive led by a crew member, an open water diver, was in excess of 100 feet. He held a line connected to a float so the boat could follow the dive group, but exceed decompression limits and had to make

a decompression stop. We dove our own profile and had no problems. Crew members not always on the deck while divers are in the water.

**Shearwater, August 2004, Woody Stene (marinestene@aol.com) Marine on St. Croix, MN.** Experience: 51-100 dives. Vis: 50 to 100 Feet. Water: 85 to 88 Fahrenheit, calm. Based in Riviera Beach, north of West Palm Beach. Converted V-hull, with space for 12. We only had 5. Accommodations would be tight with a full load. All bunks are over/under singles, with 2 each in 3 small cabins and the rest in sort of a dormitory in the front of the boat. Sleeping space was good, but storage tight. Bring minimal soft luggage; if you have large dive bags, you store them at the office. They have a lot to park your car or it's a \$20 cab ride from PBI airport. They usually frequent the northwestern Bahamas above Grand Bahama island. We got a tiger shark dive, which was unforgettable. They also did more conventional reef shark dives, with plenty of shark action. They didn't actually feed the sharks, but attract them with chum baskets which pulled lots of them in but kept things manageable. We also got to swim with dolphins and the crew had a couple of scubascooters to play with the critters and keep them around the boat. Lots of nice coral formations, and wreck diving on the Sugar Schooner was great fun, especially at night. Food was great, with buffet service. Snacks were available, and entrees were interesting, with fresh hogfish one night. One of our gang brought up several conch and then laboriously cleaned

them and turned them into conch salad! There was a soda wand on the back deck, and passengers brought their own booze. The first drink of the day was also the end of diving for that day. The staff accommodated our needs, and while they were there to watch over the less experienced, they let the veterans do their own thing. When my wife's regulator experienced a weird O ring failure, they got her a regulator from one of the crew. They are involved with ocean preservation and we got in on their baby sea turtle release, which they do every trip during the hatching season. Boat was definitely geared to photographers, and we had several advanced camera rigs in operation. Two large dedicated rinse tanks available, and ample charging facilities. Staff was helpful with camera handling, and computer reviews of the day's digital images were a nightly affair.  
([www.scuba-adventures.com](http://www.scuba-adventures.com))

## BELIZE

**Aggressor, April 2004, Ron Steckel (rsteckel@sbcglobal.net), San Jose, CA.** Vis: 60-80 feet. Water: 76-78 F. Dives logged: 325. Great service and food with a crew willing to help anyway. We only had 12 divers on board, so there was lots of room. The weather was great, although the water seemed cooler than expected with thermoclines dropping it another 4-6 degrees. Few pelagics, maybe 6 or so sharks, but numerous turtles and eagle rays. The coral was healthy and many dives offered swim-throughs. We dove the Blue Hole where everything seemed fine until at 140 feet or so my buddy

Tom got narked and started swimming in circles then charging to the surface. The fast action of the DM snared his fin and got him back under control. A great trip for newbies, in general, and for the more experienced divers to kick back and relax. ([www.aggressor.com](http://www.aggressor.com))

**Aggressor, September 2004, Chuck Aldridge, Burnsville, NC.** Vis: 60-100 feet. Water: 80-84 F. Dives logged: 250. Great dive operation – professional staff.

## Nekton Pilot, April 2004, Karen Guthrie, Laguna Beach, CA.

Experience: 51-100 dives. Water: 79 to 81 F, no currents. The Good: Whole schools of fish (I loved the schools of Creole wrasse best) but there were schools of jacks and other fish too. Beautiful walls, several moving conch, barracuda, goat fish, puffer, nurse shark, box fish, cleaner wrasse and shrimp in business, rays and peacock flounder in the sandy parts, and squid on display on every night dive. Hunting eel on night dive too! Reefs very healthy and beautiful. Great food and great people in the crew and passengers. The Bad: Two count'em two diving accidents. Woman found at 100 feet alone (when she had gone down with 2 buddies) groping the coral. Fellow divers brought her slowly to the surface as she seemed disoriented. She stopped breathing and no pulse could be found. CPR performed by doctor and nurse on board as guests, oxygen and airlift to Belize City from one of the islands. She lived and seemed just fine when she met the boat in Belize City when we got back. She vowed never to let her priority to get to the